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AUTHOR	Ediger, Marlow
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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes and compares the experimentalist philosophy of John Dewey with a current educational emphasis which advocates high standards and high expectations for all students. Advocates of high standards and high expectations call for standards written before instruction by people removed from the local classroom. The standards are to be aligned with accompanying criterion-referenced tests and written so that they can be machine scored and so that report cards can be issued to make comparisons among school districts possible. John Dewey, however, emphasized objectives arising in context by students with teacher assistance in the classroom setting and problem solving as the major methods of teaching and learning. Students were to be involved in evaluating themselves in terms of their ability to solve identified problems, and subject matter was to be acquired as it became vital for problem solving. Each student, in Dewey's view, was to contribute in a problem-solving situation but was not to be compared with others. Other points at which the high standards movement departs from John Dewey's philosophy are identified. A particular point of difference is that high standards advocates believe strongly in testing to ascertain what students have learned, while evaluation in Dewey's problem-solving curriculum emphasizes contextualism. (SLD)

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John Dewey Versus Current Educational Trends

(An Evaluation)

Marlow Ediger

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JOHN DEWEY VERSUS CURRENT EDUCATIONAL TRENDS
(An Evaluation)

Frequently, writers and speakers on educational topics reflect upon the goodness of John Dewey's experimentalist philosophy as a model for teachers and principals to follow. The purpose of this writing is to analyze and compare experimentalism with a leading recommendation on restructuring the schools, namely high standards and high expectations from students. Otherwise, it is difficult to know what is meant by restructuring education. Advocates differ on their beliefs and may even possess diverse agendas to fulfill.

High Standards for Students to Achieve

Many states have mandated objectives for student achievement in terms of high standards. The feeling is that students could achieve at a more optimal rate than is currently done. It is not clear how high these standards should be. Standards can be made so difficult that the majority of students would and do fail. Thus, the bar has been raised much in using this track and field metaphor. State mandated objectives are established under the supervision of state boards or departments of education. Thus, these standards or objectives are

1. written prior to instruction.
2. written by individuals removed in distance from the local classroom.
3. written with aligned accompanying criterion referenced tests (CRTs) containing multiple choice test items.
4. written with test items that are objective so they can be machine scored.
5. written so that report cards may be issued to make comparisons among school districts within a state.

In comparison, John Dewey (1915) in his laboratory school at the University of Chicago stressed the following:

1. objectives arising in context by students with teacher assistance in the classroom/educational setting.
2. problem solving being the major method of teaching/learning. Problems, identified by student/teacher cooperation dealt with what is relevant in society. School and society were not to be separated.
3. paper/pencil tests were not used to assess learner achievement. Rather, students are involved in evaluating the self if identified problems are being solved in an ongoing learning situation.
4. subject matter is acquired as it becomes vital for the solving of problems.Thus, subject matter is a means to an end and that end being

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to solve problems.

5. each student contributes in a problem solving situation and is not compared with others.

Methods of Instruction

The high standards movement in the United States stresses the academics as being the major areas of concentration for student learning. The academic disciplines then provide subject matter determined by state mandates for student acquisition. Methods of teaching are determined by the teacher. The methods chosen hold teachers accountable for students achieving the stated ends. Accountability here means that students are to do well on the state mandated objectives through testing. Methods of instruction used by the teacher are to be aligned with the stated mandated objectives. There seemingly are quite a few schools which have classes or leaning activities for students to do well in test taking. Drill on students doing well in taking the state mandated tests has become increasingly important.

Stringency in students doing well on these tests has been enforced by states in several ways:

1. educational bankruptcy laws. Here, the state may take over the operations of a school or school system deemed to be bankrupt in student academic achievement, as revealed by test results. The opposite side of the coin may be the following: Are these schools located in the poorer areas of the city or community where a lack of educational opportunities exist?

2. withholding state funds for districts doing poorly on state mandated tests. A leading question here is the following: Do poorly performing schools need more money rather that less for student achievement to increase?

3. education for profit being emphasized whereby a company in contract form hires/trains teachers to help students do well in achievement. The company gets paid for these services as stipulated in the contract. A question that arises here is the following: Will the bottom line, the dollar, be the determining factor in teaching students when commercial companies get into the act?

There is pressure on teachers to conform to state demands from student performance.

John Dewey would do away with drill as a method of instruction. Rather, a wide variety of learning opportunities would be experienced by students to gather information to solve problems. These activities involve reading and non-reading materials of instruction. A hands on approach

was used as learning opportunities. Active involvement by students was be in the offing. Students with teacher guidance were involved in choosing activities to gather information in the problem solving arena. Whatever is needed to solve problems may come from any necessary academic or nonacademic discipline. Cooperative learning tended to be stressed. Dr. Dewey was strong in advocating that students liked to work together in a committee rather than individually. This was a preference of most students, according to John Dewey. Democracy as a way of life was to be at the center of learning. Thus, students with teacher assistance developed their own rules for working on committees. A democracy emphasizes that individuals be involved in making rules by which they are affected. (Ediger, 1995, Chapter Seven).

Motivation for Learning

The high standards movement stresses also that teachers have high expectations from learners for achievement of state mandated objectives. Teachers are not to accept any student as being a slow learner but that all can achieve the state mandated objectives. These high expectations are to provide for motivating student achievement. With pressure on teachers to help each student achieve objectives, they will believe more in a competitive environment to bring forth the best in a free market system of education. Unsuccessful teachers should be weeded out of the profession. Parents should also have the right to choose which kind of school their offspring is to attend such as

1. charter schools. These schools are an offshoot of the public schools, but the involved teachers are not subject to the red tape, that is the rules and regulations that public schools must meet. The assumption is that charter school teachers will be creative in determining ways to assist students to motivate and achieve well. Charter schools were established to offer an alternative to parents to send their offspring in place of the pubic schools.
2. tuition vouchers. Here, the receiving school of choice of parent's children receive tuition money that ordinarily goes to the sending school. The sending school generally has provided the education for children attending its school. Motivation of students then may come from the quality of instruction received in the receiving school. Or, parents may believe that the quality of education is better in the receiving school which in return is felt by students, making for increased motivation to learn. The halo effect may also become a part of motivation to learn in the receiving school.
3. for profit schools. Boards of education may sign a contract with a commercial company providing for the education of students in a building or entire school district. Promise of higher achievement of

students in the for profit school may become a motivator for higher achievement test scores.

John Dewey advocated that motivation for learning comes from the interests of those involved in the learning activity. Interest in a problem solving activity identified by students with teacher guidance translates into motivation. Motivation comes from within the learner due to being involved in choosing the problem solving experience. Motivation for gathering information from a variety of necessary reference sources comes from a need to solve the problem. Intrinsic factors are involved in searching for needed subject matter to solve problems. Interest makes for effort. Effort put forth in problem solving is a motivator. Motivation then does not come from outside sources such as state mandated objectives, educational bankruptcy laws, tuition vouchers, among others, but from the self directed student in a democratic setting.

Sequence in Learning

The high standards movement advocates that the state mandate the sequence or order of objectives encountered by learners. If the state mandates the objectives only, then the teacher sequences which objective to cover first, second, third, and so forth. Learning opportunities to achieve objectives are to be selected by involved teachers in the classroom. Thus, sequence in learning for students comes from without, that is there are individuals, not the student, who are involved in sequencing activities for the latter. A logical sequence is then in evidence since the state and/or teachers order experiences for learners. Students may have no voice in deciding which objectives to achieve, nor the order or sequence of learning. The belief is that someone outside the student's repertoire is in a better position as compared to leaner involvement in sequencing activities and experiences for the latter.

John Dewey advocated that students in problem solving experiences be heavily involved, with teacher assistance, in sequencing their very own learnings. Thus in context within a unit of study, students identify one or more problems.The problems are to be of personal interest to students. Once, clarity is involved in stating the problems, learners need to gather subject matter or content in answer to each problem. Within committee settings, students appraise needed information and discard that which is not necessary for problem solving. Each committee has a single problem for involvement. The solution is an hypothesis and is tried out in a life like setting. Problem solving activities are practical experiences and deal with finding solutions to real dilemma situations. School and society are not to be separated in that what is relevant in society needs to be important, in school in becoming

an inherent part of the curriculum.

Those tentative solutions, or hypotheses, that do not hold up under testing within a life like situation, not a paper/pencil test, need to be revised and new information found. When engaging in problem solving, sequence in learning comes from within the student. Thus, students go through and experience a sequence of flexible steps in finding solutions.

Purpose in Learning

Purpose in the higher standards movement in education comes from those who are in charge of establishing objectives for student attainment. The direction for stating the standards generally are under the supervision of the state department of education or its counterpart. Specialists in the different academic disciplines are involved in determining what is to be taught. The objectives are set at a level that is to truly challenge students and assist in developing a future work place that is competitive with any nation on the face of the earth. The concept "World Class Standards" has been used to label the higher standards objectives for student attainment.

Teachers who implement the higher standards objectives need to help students perceive purpose or reasons for learning. Generally, when objectives are predetermined for student achievement, reinforcement methods are used to guide students to perceive purpose in learning. Thus, inexpensive prizes, announced prior to learning, may set the purpose in that students learn at a certain level of exact achievement to obtain the reward.

John Dewey believed that learning is its own reward. Purpose is inherent when students identify and solve problems of their own choosing. The teacher is always a guide and a very important one. Anarchy then does not prevail in problem solving. Thus, the teacher assists students in selecting and solving relevant problems. Students solely selecting and offering possible hypotheses to problematic situations is not acceptable; the vital ingredient of the teacher is then left out if it is up to students entirely to develop their own curriculum. The teacher has had many experiences in life and has been employed as a leader, guide, motivator, and helper with a definite vital role to play in teaching and learning situations (Ediger, 2000, 57-62).

Experience as a Concept in Education

Advocates of higher standards for students in the school setting put primary emphasis upon students experiencing subject matter from the academic disciplines. Subject matter for its very own sake is then stressed as being important in the curriculum. "Focus upon the academics" appears to be a valuable slogan for the higher standards

movement in the United States. Academic subject matter learnings are then the key to future employment opportunities as well as success in the school curriculum. Regardless of the future for any one student, these kinds of learnings provide the foundation for all other tasks and responsibilities that will be faced in society.

John Dewey did not favor one academic subject matter area over the other, but subject matter is instrumental to the solving of identified problems. Dr. Dewey then used the term "subject matter' in its broader connotation since the academics alone are not involved to solving problems. Ethics, morality, citizenship, and vocations are also a part of useful knowledge to assist in the finding of solutions to problematic situations. Dewey's experimentalism is based on experience. One then cannot know the real world as it truly is, but one can know experiences. Our perception of experiences change and with change, problems arise which need solutions. Change is a key concept in Dewey's thinking. Things never are the same, but newness, novelty, and modification has occurred. The curriculum of problem solving then becomes increasingly important. The heart of problem solving is for students to experience and solve those problems deemed relevant/vital in school and in society (Dewey, 1938).

Assessment of Student Achievement

Higher standards advocates believe strongly in testing students to ascertain what has been learned. Tests need to be standardized so all students take the same test. The major kind of test item preferred is multiple choice. Fairness in testing is indicated by standardized procedures of testing such as the same directions for test taking given to all, the same time limits for all students, and, of course, the same test items for all students. Machine scoring is used so that mass numbers of tests may be scored objectively within a state.Comparisons made among schools within a school district and among districts within a state provide gauges for teachers and administrators to notice how well they are doing in the school setting. Objective, measurable results then are in the offing for each student from test taking. Numerical results explain how well any student is doing in school. Generally, percentiles are provided here, although standard deviations, stanine scores, and other standard derived scores may indicate the degree of achievement of any one student. Again, individuals quite far removed and external to the local classroom might well have been involved in writing the test items.

Evaluation in John Dewey's problem solving curriculum emphasizes contextualism. Thus, within an ongoing learning activity, student progress may be noticed in the following situations:

1. how well problems are selected and appraised.
2. how well data is gathered in answer to an identified problem.

3. how well hypotheses are developed by involved learners.
4. how well hypotheses are tested in a life like realistic situation, not paper/pencil testing.
5. how well hypotheses are modified, if evidence warrants doing this (See Ediger, 2000, 10-12).

Teachers and administrators as well as a state in the United States need a philosophy to guide ongoing deliberations in choosing objectives, learning opportunities, and appraisal procedures. These philosophies need to be studied and understood so that better, informed choices may be made in curriculum development.

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